

VZCZCXRO7608
PP RUEHAG RUEHDBU RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHKB #0256/01 0921127
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021127Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0985
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3317
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1297
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000256

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/02/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: YOUTH ASK U.S. HELP IN EDUCATION,
INFORMATION

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: On March 31 the Ambassador held a discussion with leaders of Azerbaijani youth groups. While these young people agree that their compatriots are largely apathetic towards politics and the referendum reflected a clear turn away from democratic reform, they have many ideas on ways to bring democratic values to Azerbaijan. Several guests stressed that the current regime lacks a unifying ideology, and worried that without more focus on education uninformed versions of religion are filling this void. They asked the Ambassador for more USG programming on education (both in Azerbaijan and through exchanges) and for the USG to sponsor more fora for discussion both, live and in the media. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) On March 31 the Ambassador hosted a dinner for twelve leaders of Azerbaijani youth groups. The guests were all under 35 years old, either current students or recent graduates of bachelor's and master's degree programs. About half the guests spoke English and four had studied in the United States through USG-sponsored programs. Eight of the groups have recently decided to join together in a coalition to pursue common aims.

Problem: Azerbaijan's Closed Political Environment

3. (C) Zaur Akbar, founder of the Youth Club Public Union, began the discussion by stating that while all young people suffer from Azerbaijan's corruption, poor education system, and bad elections, the young leaders present have all stepped up to combat these problems. Rashad Shirin of the Alumni Network (AN) stated that the March referendum was a turning point for many young people, who now see no hope for reform in their country and simply want to leave. He said, however, that the new U.S. administration presents an opportunity for the security situation in the entire region to soften and with this softening it is possible for democratic rhetoric to grow.

4. (C) Togrul Alakbarov of European Student Forum Baku stated that many young people have a "I don't care" ideology and are very passive about politics. In the regions, he said, due to poor education and lack of a national ideology many people receive their information from self-appointed mullahs, and he worries Azerbaijan may become similar to Pakistan or Iran. Along similar lines, Gultakin Ramazanova of the Youth Club Public Union stated that women's issues are the greatest problem in Azerbaijan. She said issues of

domestic violence, early marriage, and low education for women are enormous, citing a rural statistic that when students begin school 50% of them are girls but by graduation only 5% are girls.

Solution 1: U.S. Help in Education, Information

15. (C) Rashad Shirin proposed that the solution to these problems was investment in promoting good ideas through civil society and education programs. In a statement that received approval from several other speakers, Shirin asked for the opening of an American university in Azerbaijan, which would provide a liberal education without the corruption found in Azerbaijani universities. Adnan Hajizade of "Ol" network said that this program could start small, with a U.S.-sponsored forum where people who had studied in the U.S. could teach others who want to learn. Jeyhun Karamov of the American Alumni Association agreed, and also asked the USG to use its influence with the GOAJ to make the GOAJ study abroad programs more accessible, especially to those in the regions.

16. (C) Vafa Jafarova of Dalga Youth Movement asked for USG assistance in creating space for information exchange. She explained that she had pictures from the referendum of ballots marked "no" which were placed in the trash bin outside a polling station, but that no newspaper would agree to publish them. She is therefore posting the photos on youtube. She said that young people needed space to discuss, both in person and in the media.

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Solution 2: Networking and a Positive National Ideology

17. (C) Ilaha Rafaelgyzy explained that Azerbaijan needs new leadership both in the government and the opposition, and that this new power can come from youth who are educated abroad or part of a youth group. She explained that it was time for change to come from within Azerbaijan, not just from international supporters. Emin Milli of AN expanded on this idea, explaining that a network of educated young professionals had to be ready for the moment when the current power system collapses, much as the leaders of the 1918-1920 Azerbaijan Democratic Republic were ready when the Russian Empire collapsed. He said that young people cannot change the system now, as "the regime has all the money and power", but by creating a network of progressive people with connections abroad, they will be ready when the current system "collapses from its own hollowness." When asked about whether change was possible from inside the government, Milli replied that the members of the younger generation who take government positions are not being promoted past a certain level. Shirin added that the network of corruption is so strong in Azerbaijan that it is impossible to advance inside the system without joining it.

18. (C) Milli also stressed that young people need to be proud of something in their country in order to bring change, and that the current system provides little in the way of ideology. He proposed spreading information about the 1918-20 Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) as a part of Azerbaijan's past that its people can look to for inspiration. Milli, Shirin, and others have held a series of fora on the ADR in western parliaments in order to raise awareness of Azerbaijan, and are looking to hold a similar one in the U.S. Congress.

COMMENT

19. (C) While these young leaders are in agreement that Azerbaijan is headed down an anti-democratic path, they are not pessimistic on the prospects for long-term change, if the right investments are made. They readily acknowledged that

they and their compatriots hold the ultimate responsibility for bringing liberal democracy to Azerbaijan. They made clear they are ready to engage and be active. At the same time, they underscored the importance of tangible support from the international community for their efforts, asking outright for an increase in the level of U.S. and western engagement with the country at the grassroots level. More USG programming aimed at youth, education, community development and governance will help sustain and expand the network of liberal-minded professionals these young people are attempting to build, and will help lay the foundation for Azerbaijan's path to reform over the long term.

DERSE